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Remarks concerning the all-black coastal boubous (*Laniarius* spp.) of Kenya and southern Somalia

by Donald A. Turner, Brian W. Finch & Nigel D. Hunter

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Following the recommendation of Nguembock *et al.* (2008) that three races of the Tropical Boubou complex be treated specifically, namely *Laniarius (aethiopicus) major*, *L. (a.) sublacteus* and *L. (a.) erlangeri*, attention is now drawn to the taxonomic position of the all-black boubous occurring from the Tana Delta, Kenya, north to the Juba and Shabeelle valleys in southern Somalia, which most authorities have treated as rare black morphs of *L. (a.) sublacteus* and *L. (a.) erlangeri* (White 1962, Ash & Miskell 1998, Fry *et al.* 2000). With no all-black birds sampled in the Nguembock *et al.* (2008) study, the possibility of a major re-appraisal in our understanding of these coastal boubous has been missed.

On 15 July 1878 Gustav Fischer collected an all-black boubou at Kipini (Tana Delta) which Reichenow (1879) named *Dryoscopus nigerrimus*. In 1905, Reichenow named two further boubous, from the collections of Baron von Erlanger, both from the Juba Valley in southern Somalia. An all-black specimen was named *Laniarius erlangeri*, whilst a more typical black-and-white bird was named *Laniarius aethiopicus somaliensis*.

Van Someren (1922: 116, 1932: 307), after comparing topotypes of Reichenow's two described forms (*erlangeri* and *somaliensis*) with his own material from Kipini, Manda, Lamu and Juba, seriously questioned the validity of *erlangeri* and *nigerrimus*. Grant & Mackworth-Praed (1944), making no mention of any all-black birds, recognised *L. ferrugineus somaliensis* and *L. f. sublacteus* as the two coastal forms of Tropical Boubou, and Stresemann (1947) having examined *nigerrimus* argued it was just a morph of the sympatric black-and-white *L. f. sublacteus*, despite that van Someren (1922) considered that his specimens from Lamu exhibited intermediate features. Subsequently, White (1962), Ash & Miskell (1998), Fry *et al.* (2000) and Dickinson (2003) also recognised *L. aethiopicus sublacteus* and *L. a. erlangeri* as the two East African coastal boubous, although White (1962) failed to mention either *nigerrimus*

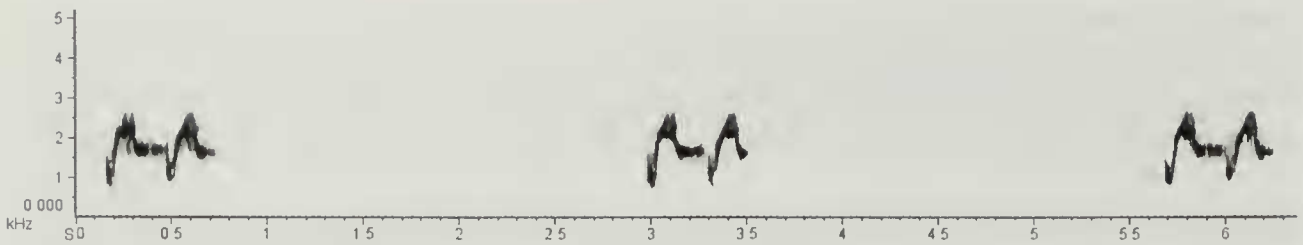


Figure 1. Sonogram of the explosive two-noted call produced by the all-black boubou, recorded on Manda Island, Lamu District, Kenya, on 25 April 2010, by Brian W. Finch, using a Sony TCM 200DV recorder and Sennheiser directional microphone. Sonogram created using Raven Lite 1.0 for Windows, and background subsequently cleaned in Photoshop.

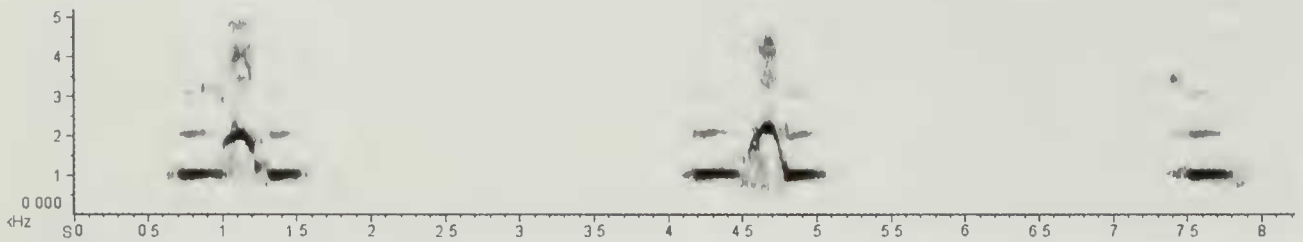


Figure 2. Sonogram of the three-noted 'bell-like' calls of the coastal Tropical Boubou *Laniarius aethiopicus sublacteus*, recorded on Manda Island, Lamu District, Kenya, on 25 April 2010, by Brian W. Finch, using a Sony TCM 200DV recorder and Sennheiser directional microphone. Sonogram created using Raven Lite 1.0 for Windows, and background subsequently cleaned in Photoshop.

or *somaliensis*. Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955) had treated *nigerrimus* as a black morph of *L. f. sublacteus* and *somaliensis* as a synonym of *L. f. erlangeri*.

Recent sound-recordings from Manda Island, Lamu District, north-east Kenya, have revealed that glossy all-black birds occurring alongside typical black-and-white Tropical Boubous (*L. a. sublacteus*) possess a vastly different vocal repertoire, making them surely worthy of more critical examination and comparison with old specimens of *Laniarius nigerrimus* and *L. erlangeri*. Four different calls were recorded, three of which were loud, ringing and explosive with an almost 'gonolek-like' quality to them, and totally unlike either Slate-coloured Boubou *Laniarius funebris* or any form of Tropical Boubou *L. aethiopicus*, as follows. Firstly, a repeated loud *wee-ooo* delivered from a high exposed perch at a rate of slightly more than one per second. Secondly, a loud double *weerk-weerk* also from a high exposed perch, lasting little more than a second, but spaced by a slightly longer interval (Fig. 1). Thirdly, a throaty four-note *jhi-jhi-jhi-jhi* lasting little more than a second with a c.1 second pause between each set of calls. The female would join the male in a duet with a throaty soft *churr* commencing almost simultaneously with the male's *wee-ooo* call, and lasting fractionally longer. The term 'gonolek-type' is used to indicate a certain similarity between the calls of all-black birds and the two species of gonolek in western Kenya (Black-headed Gonolek *Laniarius erythrogaster* and Papyrus Gonolek *L. mufumbiri*), both of which are noted for their loud explosive calls from deep cover.

Fourteen playback experiments were performed, and playback of calls of the coastal *L. a. sublacteus* taken *in situ* only attracted identical pairs of other black-and-white *L. a. sublacteus*, while the all-black birds exhibited no response. Similarly, playback of calls of the all-black birds would immediately attract identical pairs of other all-black birds, but were ignored by black-and-white *L. a. sublacteus*. However, when we interchanged the calls of each of the two all-black pairs, the results were dramatic, with each becoming highly vocal and aggressive.

The parachute display of the all-black male birds, with deep wingbeats, fully fanned tail and raised mantle feathers, reminded BWF of a similar display-flight of Sooty Boubou *L.*

leucorhynchus that he has witnessed several times in the Mabira Forest of southern Uganda, whilst the churring notes of the female in duet, together with the males' use of high exposed perches from which to vocalise further reminded BWF of Red-naped Bushshrike *L. ruficeps*. Although there are no recordings of any southern Somalia birds, J. Miskell (pers. comm.) noted that in 1979 when travelling in the Shabeelle Valley with J. Mwaki, an experienced field observer and technician from the National Museums of Kenya, Mwaki commented that the call of an all-black boubou had a distinct 'gonolek-type' quality to it, rather than the bell-like quality of Tropical Boubou calls he was familiar with in Kenya. Similarly, throughout their recent stay on Manda Island, BWF & NDH were equally struck by the loud, ringing, explosive calls of all-black birds as opposed to the three-noted 'bell-like' calls of *L. a. sublacteus* (Fig. 2).

Given that all earlier authorities have treated the all-black boubous on Manda Island as a dark morph of the coastal Tropical Boubou *L. a. sublacteus*, consideration must also be given to Slate-coloured Boubou. The last-named species, with which we are all very familiar, inhabits dry to semi-arid scrub, and while it was not encountered on either Manda or Lamu islands, it does occur in dry scrub on the adjacent mainland, especially at Kipini in the Tana Delta, where Fischer originally collected *nigerrimus*. Throughout its range, Slate-coloured Boubou is immediately recognised by its diagnostic *tonk-tonk-coco-wheet* call. Furthermore, its dull matt black and grey plumage is strikingly different to the glossy black with violet / green iridescence of the Manda birds. Similarly, the single specimen of *nigerrimus* in Berlin and the five all-black specimens in Nairobi are obviously glossy black and easily distinguishable from any Slate-coloured Boubou.

The all-black Manda birds occupy tall scrubby woodland, i.e. a much 'richer' habitat than that preferred by Slate-coloured Boubou, which shuns forests of all types and on the coast is restricted to dense low semi-arid *Croton* thickets. That three boubous, one all glossy black, one matt black and grey, and one black and white, have been recorded within a relatively small area of coastal East Africa from the Shabeelle and Juba valleys in southern Somalia south to Manda and Kipini in north-east Kenya is remarkable. Should these all-black boubous be deemed worthy of a higher taxonomic status (which the vocal evidence from Manda suggests), rather than merely races of Tropical Boubou, the nomenclature of East African birds will require revision. (1) The all-black birds may revert to *Laniarius nigerrimus*, while (2) the black-and-white birds in southern Somalia would revert to *L. aethiopicus somaliensis*, as the taxonomic status of *erlangeri* as defined by Nguembock *et al.* (2008) would require re-evaluation because that name was originally employed by Reichenow for an all-black bird.

We hope that any future critical re-examination of these coastal boubous will include samples of the all-black birds. It is abundantly clear that a thorough molecular and vocal study of all relevant populations of these confusing coastal boubous is urgently needed.

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First documented records of Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus euleri* for French Guiana, and an overlooked specimen from Ecuador

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Of the eight *Coccyzus* cuckoos resident in or visitors to continental South America, Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *C. euleri* is one of the rarest and least known. Although it is reported across most of South America east of the Andes, the species' breeding range is poorly known (Payne 1997). Breeding has been reported in northern Argentina, in Paraguay, in southern and eastern Brazil, and as far north as Roraima in northern Brazil (Payne 1997, 2005). The latter is based on a female (FMNH 343751) collected in October with an ovary measuring 14 × 10 mm, two exploded follicles and an enlarged oviduct. Northern Brazil lies far from other known breeding areas and, although a migrant could possess developed gonads prior to reaching its breeding grounds, these data prove breeding (S. W. Cardiff, M. A. Echeverry-Galvis, A. Jones, J. V. Remsen, D. Willard *in litt.* 2010). Elsewhere, Pearly-breasted Cuckoos are probably only austral migrants, as suggested by dates and the paucity of records.

Only two records are known in Bolivia, both from dpto. Santa Cruz (Vidoz *et al.* 2010). Two specimens and a presumed sight record are available from Esmeraldas, Pichincha and Napo provinces in northern Ecuador (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001; R. S. Ridgely *in litt.* 2008). The species has been reported from just two localities in northern and eastern Colombia (Hilty & Brown 1986). Pearly-breasted Cuckoo is uncommon and irregular in Venezuela, where the species has been reported in the Distrito Federal and from Isla Margarita, Mérida, Amazonas, Apure and Bolívar, but its status in the country is unclear (Hilty 2003, Payne 2005). A vagrant collected on Sombrero Island, the northernmost of the Lesser Antilles, is the only validated record for North America (Banks 1988, AOU 1998). Two claims in central